

PATTERNS AND CONCEPTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSUMPTION: how to deal with the current background?

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INTRODUCTION

The global patterns of consumption are considered unsustainable, resulting in depletion of non-renewable natural resources and exceeding Earth's carrying capacity of properly supporting the ecological balance and human development in the long term. The concept of Sustainable Consumption and Production boosted in 1992, during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Eco 92) (UNEP, 2009). It referred to the use of products and services that meet the basic needs of consumers, bringing a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials, and emissions of waste and pollutants, reducing impacts throughout the life cycle of the products or services without jeopardizing the needs of the future generations (CLARK, 2007).

While sustainable consumption is intimately linked to consumers turned to minimized purchasing patterns in comparison to average consumers (BARBER, 2007), global spending on products and services has been growing at a rate of 3% a year since the 1970s decade (CLARK, 2007). In this sense, initiatives towards adequate consumption habits, such as education for sustainability (JACOBI, 2007), the rights for the information and consumer awareness campaigns (UNEP, 2016) may lead to a significant shifting in consumption habits, especially after the implementation of such initiatives (BARBER, 2007).

A few years ago, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were presented as a means of promoting economic prosperity, social equity and environmental quality (UNITED NATIONS, 2015). According to that agenda, action is needed to "ensure that current material needs do not lead to the over-extraction of resources or to the degradation of environmental resources", including the development of "policies that improve resource efficiency, reduce waste and mainstream sustainability practices across all sectors of the economy" (UNITED NATIONS, 2019). SDG number 12 refers to "Responsible consumption and production", which is the goal that came to address this issue and is the focus of this study.

PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

From the perspective mentioned above, there is not a widespread distinction between the definitions used to terms associated with "consumption". The term sustainable consumption has been widely used in any situation where something merely relates to an environmental cause or refers to a less impacting production process. Also, terminologies like conscious consumption and sustainable consumption are commonly used similarly (LOREK; SPANGENBERG, 2014). This implicates that any consumption practices where a consumer is somewhat aware of the action of consuming may refer to an environmentally friendly, economically viable and socially fair form of consumption, which might lead to a misunderstanding of what sustainability represents.

Given the multiple variations assigned to the terminology "consumption" and the interpretation resulting from these thoughts, it seems necessary to clarify the available information regarding applications of terms related to "sustainable consumption". Thus, this study aimed to track the main concepts related to consumption, as well as to provide some proper applications to them to clarify what refers to sustainable consumption.

The definition of these concepts is quite relevant for better planning, implementation, and evaluation of public policies towards sustainable consumption, as well as providing

consumers with valuable information on their consumption habits. Hence, meeting the goals established by several countries in global summits, and the Sustainable Development Goal (UNITED NATIONS, 2015) of ensuring responsible consumption and production patterns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In purely economic terms, consumption relates to an individual choice for what best meets the needs or desires of the consumer (SANNE, 2002). In turn, minimum consumption implies consuming strictly according to the need of the individual. In Economics, it refers to the minimum level of consumption necessary to ensure the formation of human capital (MATSUO; TOMODA, 2012). However, some currents of research indicate that this form of consumption is more than mere survival; it involves meeting human needs beyond the common requirements to other living beings, including knowledge, culture, and entertainment (BAUMGÄRTNER et al., 2017).

Ethical consumption is a characteristic assigned to consumers with ethically oriented minds, who feel co-responsible for the impacts on the environment of human activities, as well as for the social injustices such activities might cause (NEWHOLM; SHAW, 2007; SEBASTIANI et al., 2012). Those consumers aim to avoid purchasing products manufactured from inappropriate means of human and animal work, or means incompatible with the preservation of the natural environment (SHANG; PELOZA, 2016).

When one speaks of conscious consumption, consumption takes place from a reflection in the way of choosing products and services; it is more rational, depending on how appropriate products are for consumption, how needed they are, and the socio-environmental impacts they can cause (MMA, 2005). By consciously consuming, consumers modify the way they buy acquire products and services, taking into account possible impacts in the context of the product's life cycle in the pre-consumption stage, i.e., during the production, distribution, and marketing of this good (SCHOR; WILLIS, 2008). Besides, the abdication of consumption may be reported (BAUMGÄRTNER et al., 2017).

Responsible consumption, like conscious consumption, requires a critical reflection on the act of consuming. This form of consumption works as a consumer's intervention that seeks consumption alternatives and understands that their choices affect the "[...] quality of life, society, the economy, and nature." (PISTELLI; MASCARENHAS, 2011, p. 5). It is a form of rational consumption, where conscious consumers acquire all available information about problems resulting from consumption and aim to change their overall consumer behavior, not just about a specific product or service (ULUSOY, 2016).

Willis and Schor (2012) point political consumption as a strategy for individuals to connect their attitudes with the demand of social fairness and environmental preservation. With this attitude, which is necessarily taken by consumers who are aware of a given subject, political consumers consider their choices an effective way of "voting with their money", and "electing" the society they want to be part of (NEILSON; PAXTON, 2010; WATKINS et al., 2016).

Early in the 1990s, Ellen (1994) pointed out that whenever people believe they know about environmental issues – even if they do not – they engage more actively in green consumption. Nevertheless, Pagliasis and Krontalis (2014) assume that concern for the environment and subjective environmental knowledge are the precedents for green consumption. From this framework, green consumption is the inclusion of the environmental variable as a requirement for the consumer to buy a particular product. In other words, products and services that lower impacts on the environment throughout their life cycle are preferred (MMA, 2005). Although focused on sustainability, this form of consumption

presents the limitation of exchanging a particular product or brand to another, representing a *greening* of products and services, but not necessarily the reduction of consumption levels (AKENJI, 2013).

The concept of sustainable consumption gained momentum at the Rio-92 Conference, promoted by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This event resulted in a document containing principles for sustainable development, among which is the "reduction of standards unsustainable production and consumption" (BANBURY et al., 2012). Consuming sustainably is acquiring as needed, prioritizing products that cause less environmental impacts throughout their life cycle without jeopardizing the needs of future generations (MMA, 2011, UNEP, 2016).

Sustainable consumption is a matter linked to consumers who turn to certain purchasing and use patterns minimized in comparison to average consumers, shifting their behavior and increasing environmental awareness. This form of consumption aims to increase awareness of the sustainability triple bottom line and change the way people consume, as well as their values and motivation, requiring them to adopt different approaches to buy and use products and services (BARBER, 2007). The Brazilian Ministry of Environment also approached sustainable consumption as having a more societal and less individual purpose, since sustainable consumption is aimed at collective actions and conjectural changes in a society, so that consumption patterns become more sustainable as a whole (MMA, 2005).

Although there are lots of definitions regarding sustainable consumption available in the literature, many still accept an early definition from the Oslo Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption, that consumers are reported to consume sustainably when they "buy as needed, while prioritizing products that have lower environmental impacts throughout their life cycle, without compromising future generations' earnings" (OSLO SYMPOSIUM, 1994).

METHODS

This study carried out a bibliographical review in scientific journals, documents, and reports to identify the terminological definitions related to the term "consumption". Then, this search was deepened by using as keywords: consumption, minimum consumption, ethical consumption, conscious consumption, responsible consumption, political consumption, green consumption, sustainable consumption. In all, thirty bibliographic sources were further considered in this study. Second, a hypothetical choice made by a generic consumer for a specific product was simulated through a logical flowchart. The choices directed the fictional individual to the different consumption patterns previously identified, which enabled one to characterize the principles associated with each concept.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a summary of the main terminologies found in the literature related to "consumption" and key differences among them, as already described previously in this study.

Table 1. Summary of patterns and concepts of consumption.

Consumption	Definition	References
Minimum	Consuming strictly according to an individual's needs.	Matsuo; Tomoda (2012)
Ethical	Consumers feel co-responsible about the impacts caused to the environment by all human activities. Thus, the purchase of products made from inadequate means is avoided.	Newholm; Shaw (2007) Sebastiani et al. (2013) Shang; Pelozo (2016)
Conscious	There is a reflection by the consumer on how choosing products. Abdication of the consumption itself may be observed.	MMA (2005) Schor; Willis (2008) Baumgärtner et al. (2017)
Responsible	There is a reflection on consumption and a development towards a change of consumer behavior as a whole, not just about a single product.	Pistelli; Mascarenhas (2011) Ulusoy (2016)
Political	Consumers connect their attitudes towards social justice and sustainability by "electing" the kind of society they want to be part of.	Willis; Schor (2012) Neilson; Paxton (2010) Watkins et al. (2016)
Green	Inclusion of an environmental variable as a requirement for purchasing a particular product.	Ellen (1994) MMA (2005) Pagiaslis; Krontalis (2014) Akenji (2013)
Sustainable	Use of products and services that meet basic needs, providing a better quality of life to the consumer, without jeopardizing the needs of future generations.	Oslo Symposium (1994) UNEP (2016)

Source: Adapted from Severis (2018).

Sustainable consumption is the most comprehensive term among all, while somehow related to all terminologies. For instance, *sustainable* consumption and/or *responsible* consumption are driven by the consumption of products that cause less environmental impacts, economic development and social fairness, which is a characteristic observed in *green* consumers, although the less impacting product may still be *too much* damaging and the individual does not want to be involved with such thing (*political* consumption). Considering this, the sustainable consumer considers that such a product is not *necessary*, or there is might exist a substitute that will give him or her similar gains. Being *conscious* of this, also being an *ethical* consumer, the consumer makes his or her decision considering that the chosen option will preserve the environmental quality for the present and the future generations.

In Figure 1, there is a fictional situation complementing the understating on the patterns of consumption. In this logical flowchart, a consumer is allowed to choose between sweaters of the same brand and function, but one is made with organic cotton, costing R\$ 180,00 and the other is made of polyester, at the cost of R\$ 90,00.

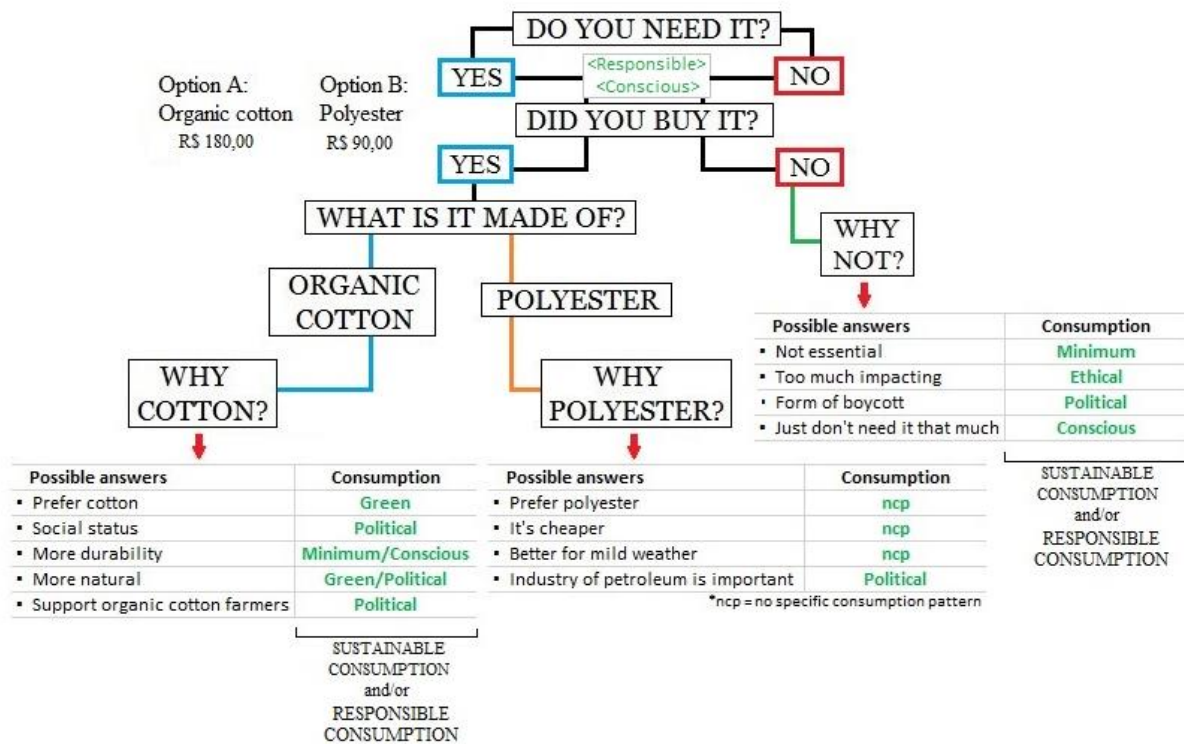


Figure 1. Flowchart of purchase choices and the consequent consumption setups.

Source: Adapted from Severis et al. (2017).

In Figure 1, it is observed that the consumer “asks” himself or herself if he or she needs to buy a new sweater. Making this reflection characterizes the consumer as conscious because it is necessary to be aware of the action that is being done, that is, the act of consuming. Therefore, conscious consumption does not refer to something necessarily beneficial to the environment, but to the reasoning of the need or not to consume.

The other consumption forms arise according to the motivation for the consumption or even the non-consumption, as defined above. Some motivations presented in Figure 1 do not indicate consumption at all because they are not related to any of the patterns analyzed in this study and usually occur to average consumers or those who are not engaged to environmental issues.

Given that sustainable consumption is a form of consumption in which the individual consumes only his or her “part of the Earth” in terms of ecological footprint (PEATTIE; COLLINS, 2009), among other considerations, it is observed that sustainable consumption encompasses, to a greater or lesser extent, the other consumption patterns and terminologies. Given the “*haves to*” to consume sustainably, and the enabling factors of environmental suitability, economic viability, and social fairness, the most rational alternative would be to denominate a given product as *more sustainable* than another one, or as being *closer* to sustainability comparing to other options.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable consumption encompasses the definitions used for the minimum, ethical, conscious, responsible, political and green consumption patterns, which is the most comprehensive and closely related concept to sustainability standards. However, a consumer can only be characterized as sustainable, if a scenario is created to compare his or her

consumption patterns to an average consumer, that is, adopting certain consumption habits, a consumer would be closer to being more sustainable.

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